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ABSTRACT

The present study looks at the relationship between working mothers and adolescents, particularly at the support function mothers potentially fulfill for their sons and daughters. It attempts to determine: (1) whether maternal employment affects the mothers' performance in helping their adolescents deal with the problems and anxiety they confront in the course of day-to-day living; and if there are significant variations between working and non-working mothers, (2) what implications this has for the well-being of their adolescents. Subjects were 274 high school students who voluntarily filled out questionnaires during class time. Among other things, data showed that there is no significant difference between the effect of full-time and part-time maternal employment on adolescents' disclosure of problems and tensions to mothers. However, compared to non-working mothers, maternal employment did have negative effects on female adolescents. (Author/BP)

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Maternal Employment Status, Social Support and Adolescent Well Being[1]

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Increasing numbers of mothers are entering the work force; therefore, the question of whether maternal employment affects children adversely continues to be an issue for popular debate and scientific enquiry. Several research reviews (Douvan, 1965; Hoffman, 1974; Howell, 1972) trace the course of attitudes and research in this important area. In general, these show that early speculations and predictions that maternal absence from the home would have negative effects on the children have not been upheld by the empirical research. Moreover, it seems that other factors which characterize the child, the parents or the family situation may be more directly related to consequences for the children than the fact of maternal employment itself.

In looking specifically at the research relevant to the adolescent age group Lambert, et al. (1972) reported that the effects of maternal employment depended on the following factors: (1) the sex of the child; (2) the part or full-time employment status of the mother; (3) the familys' socio-economic status and (4) the stability of the home. As a sample of some of the findings, Douvan and Adelson (1966) in a study of a national sample of adolescents concluded that mother's employment had a greater effect on female children than on the males. They found, for example, that daughters of working mothers were

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more likely to select their mothers as adult ideals than were daughters of homemakers; they also tended to assume greater responsibility for household tasks. Further analyses showed that daughters of full time working mothers engaged in fewer leisure activities but tended to date, go steady and hold part-time jobs more frequently than daughters of part-time working or non-working mothers. This was particularly true of girls of lower socio-economic families, whereas girls from middle class homes where mothers worked full-time were more like the daughters of part-time working mothers. The latter group is characterized by high activity levels and involvement in social and leisure pursuits. They were more likely to have open disagreements with their parents and showed more independence and autonomy in their thoughts and values.

Although maternal employment did not appear to have as great an impact on the behaviours and attitudes of the males in their sample, Douvan and Adelson (1966) did find that sons from lower class backgrounds whose mothers were employed have been characterized as exhibiting more rebelliousness against authority figures, having a lower energy level, participating less in leisure pursuits and organized programs and were less likely to choose father as the adult ideal. On the other hand, boys from higher status homes whose mothers work full or part-time and boys from lower status homes where the mother works part-time were found to differ very little from other boys.

A prevailing concern has been that a mother's absence from the home would deprive the children of some essential emotional

or cognitive inputs and provide less adequate supervision of their behaviours and activities. This in turn might result in some form of deprivation, maladjustment or delinquency. However, Howell (1972), after reviewing studies comparing the behaviour and personality characteristics of adolescents with working and non-working mothers, found them to be quite similar in (1) intelligence, (2) school achievement, (3) personality, (4) delinquent behaviour and (5) psychosomatic complaints. In addition, studies which make direct reference to mother - adolescent relationships (Propper, 1972; Roy, 1961) conclude that adolescents with working mothers receive as much attention, emotional support and affection from their mothers as do other adolescents. Unfortunately, these latter studies have typically used rather global and sometimes indirect assessments of the maternal adolescent relationship. The findings therefore are not totally reassuring or compelling and further research seems warranted.

The present study looks more closely at the relationship between working mothers and adolescents, particularly at the support function mothers potentially fulfill for their sons and daughters. It attempts to determine: (1) whether maternal employment affects the mothers' performance in helping their adolescents deal with the problems and anxiety they confront in the course of day-to-day living; and if there are significant variations between working and non-working mothers, (2) what implications this has for the well-being of their adolescents.

Subjects

Data were collected from 274 high school students, 93 males and 181 females, from grades 9 through 13. Students ranged in age from 13 to 20 years with a mean age of 16.3 years. Eighty-five percent of the sample were living with both parents. It is this subsample (N=234) that will be employed in this analysis since it represents male and female adolescents from intact families. The demographic characteristics of the sample are fully presented in Table 1.

Enter Table 1 About Here

Mothers' ages ranged from under 35 to between 56 and 60; fathers' ages ranged from under 35 to over 60. Fathers, in addition to being slightly older were also slightly better educated. Ninety-three percent of the fathers were employed full-time; fifty-four percent of the mothers were employed outside the home (34% full-time, 20% part-time). Family incomes covered a wide range - under $5,000 to over $25,000 per annum. Finally, the vast majority (approximately 99%) of the sample had one or more siblings. Since there were no significant sex differences on the demographic variables, and the intercorrelations among major variables were the same in the two groups, the male and female respondents were treated as one subject group.

Procedure

The subject sample was drawn from three secondary schools

in or near the Metropolitan Toronto area. The schools differed from one another to the extent that they represented (1) a central-core area school, (2) an older suburban schools, and (3) a new suburban school. The study was explained to administrative officials and teachers in these schools and their cooperation was requested. All agreed to cooperate by making students in particular classes available during regular class time to fill out a lengthy questionnaire. The students received a brief introduction to the study and were told that participation was voluntary.

Measures

Six aspects of the informal helping relationship each respondent enjoyed with his/her mother, his/her father and a peer who helped them the most, were examined.

(1) Likelihood of informing helper when tense

Each person indicated the likelihood of letting their mother, father, and peer know how they were feeling and why, when they experienced a "bad day" and had a problem that was making them tense. Five responses, of Likert-scale format, were provided. These ranged from "I always let my mother know my feelings ater a bad day and why I'm feeling this way" (1), through "I sometimes let my mother know" (3), to "I never let my mother know my feelings after a bad day and why I'm feeling this way" (5).

(2) Reasons for informing helper

If respondents did inform their mothers (fathers, or

other helper) they were asked to indicate from a list of 11 reasons those that were relevant. The list included such items as "to get it off my chest, an outlet or release", "She generally asks me what's wrong", "I trust her", "so she won't bug me", "to get her point of view", and "because I want sympathy, comfort," among others. A composite measure was created by summing the total number of positive reasons endorsed.

(3) Reasons for not informing helper

If respondents did not inform their mothers (fathers, or other helper) they were asked to indicate from a list of 11 reasons, those that were relevant. The list included such items as "Don't want to bother, worry or upset her", "I prefer to solve my own problems", "It would embarrass me to talk about some things with her", "She does too much lecturing and not enough listening" among others. A composite measure was created by summing the total number of negative reasons endorsed.

(4) Satisfaction with help from helper

Each respondent was asked to indicate his satisfaction with the amount of help they got from the three sources of informal help. Six alternatives of Likert scale format were provided. These ranged from "I am very satisfied with the way my mother helps me cope or deal with my problems" (1), through "I am somewhat satisfied" (3), to "I am very dissatisfied with the ways my mother helps me cope or deal with my problems" (6).

(5) Problems respondents felt free to go to helper with

Respondents were asked to indicate which of 12 problems they felt free to go to each of the three helpers for help with.

They had a choice of "yes" or "no". The problems included: school-related, family or home-related, sex-related, physical health, friends, money, future goals, etc.

(6) Typical reactions from helpers

Respondents were asked to indicate, from a list of 15 responses or actions, which would typically describe the reactions they would receive from the three helpers when they went to them with a problem or because they felt under strain or pressure. Respondents had a choice of "yes" or "no". The responses included: "She would order, direct or command me to do something", "She would agree with me no matter what I said", "She would say 'I told you so' or 'This wouldn't have happened if you listened to me", "She would listen to what I have to say and really try to understand it from my point of view and appreciate my feelings", and "she would try to make me feel better by talking me out of my feelings, reassuring me, denying the strength of my feelings", among others. These data were then separately factor analyzed for the three helpers. Four interpretable factors appeared for mothers and fathers, and five for peers (Burke & Weir, 1977a).

Measures of Stress

Respondents were asked to indicate how bothered or concerned they were about twenty-six separate aspects of their life. The aspects selected were those generally referred to as particular problems of adolescents in the academic and popular literature. They included such items as "concern about my performance in school", concern about what others think of me", "feeling awkward in social situations", "concern about the way I look", "not knowing what

I want to do with my life", etc. Respondents indicated how much they were concerned or bothered by each of the potential problem areas by endorsing one of five Likert-type alternatives. These ranged from "almost never bothered by it" (1), through "sometimes bothered by it" (3), to "almost always bothered by it" (5).

Responses to the twenty-six statements assessing the degree of stress the adolescents experienced in their day-to-day living were factor analyzed, using a principal components varimax rotation method. Seven factors, accounting for 61 percent of the variance, emerged. These seven factors, the number of items loading above .40 on each, and the internal consistency (coefficient alpha) of each factor, are shown in the top half of Table 2. An acceptable level of reliability was present in all but one case (Future Goals).

Enter Table 2 About Here

Measures of Well-being

Three conceptually distinct areas of well-being were examined:

(1) Satisfaction with Life

This measure, derived in part from earlier research by Bachman et al. (1970), contained 7 items. Five of these focused on respondent's satisfaction with specific areas of his life (e.g., friendships, family and home life, leisure time). Two of the items tapped more global aspects: their satisfaction with life in general, and whether they felt they had good or bad breaks in life. Respondents indicated their degree of

satisfaction on a five-point Likert-type scale. The alternatives ranged from (1) "completely satisfied", through (3) "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" to (5) "very dissatisfied". Responses to the seven items were summed to form an index measure of satisfaction with life.

(2) Mental and Physical Well-being

This was assessed by a 17-item scale used in earlier research by Gurin, Veroff and Feld (1960). Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements about their general well-being. Items included such things as "Are you bothered by all sorts of aches, pains and ailments in different parts of your body?", "Do your hands ever tremble enough to bother you?", "Do you find it difficult to get up in the morning?", and "Are you ever troubled by headaches or pains in the head?". Their responses were recorded on five-point Likert-type scales, the alternatives ranging from "Never" (1), through "Sometimes (3) to "Nearly Always" (5). Responses to the seventeen items were combined to form an index measure of mental and physical well-being.

(3) Affective States

The affective states of our respondents were examined using measures which Bachman and his colleagues (Bachman et al., 1970) developed in a longitudinal study of high school students. The measures were designed to evaluate 11 affective states: Emotional Dependence (6 items), Impulse to Aggression (4 items), Overt Aggression (3 items), Depression (6 items), Anomie (3 items), General Anxiety (7 items), Resentment (7 items), Anxiety

and Tension (5 items), Irritability (8 items), Guilt (5 items), and Lack of Social Support (4 items). A 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) "almost always true" through to (5) "never true" was used for each item (e.g., I feel sad) was of them. The bottom half of table 2 indicates the various measures of well-being, the number of items in each, and the internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) of each measure. An acceptable level of reliability was present in all but one instance (Emotional Dependence).

Enter Table 2 About Here

Results

Effects of Maternal Employment on the Social Support Process

First, male and female adolescents whose mothers were employed full-time were compared with male and female adolescents whose mother worked part-time. There were no statistically significant differences on helping process variables, measures of experienced life stress, or on measures of well-being. Thus, whether the mother was working full or part-time was not related to the extent to which adolescents disclosed to her when they were experiencing difficulties to their satisfaction with her help, the number of positive or negative motivation whether they shared their difficulties with her, or to the way mothers were seen reacting to them when they came to her for help. In addition, maternal employment (i.e., full vs. part-time) had no effect on these areas as far as help from fathers and a peer were con-

cerned. Finally, adolescents experienced as much life stress and the same level of reported well-being whether their mothers worked full-time or part-time.

The two groups of adolescents whose mothers worked full-time and part-time were then combined and compared with those adolescents whose mothers were not employed outside the home. A number of statistically significant differences were present. Adolescents whose mothers were employed outside the home were less likely to let their mother know when they were experiencing difficulties that were making them tense ($p < .03$), were more likely to endorse a disinterest factor as reasons for not informing their mothers when they were experiencing difficulties ($p < .01$), were less likely to inform their peers when they were experiencing difficulties that were making them tense ($p < .07$), and felt free to take fewer problems for help with to peers ($p < .07$). In addition when the three specific sources of informal help were combined, adolescents whose mothers worked for pay outside the home were significantly less likely to inform them when they were experiencing difficulties that were making them tense ($p < .06$) and were significantly less satisfied with the over-all help they received from these three sources ($p < .06$).

Effects of Maternal Employment on Life Stress and Well-Being

Adolescents with employed mothers were significantly different from adolescents whose mothers were full-time homemakers on several dimensions. Adolescents with employed mothers reported experiencing more stress in their lives from feelings of Isolation and Loneliness ($p < .04$), Difficulties in their Relationship with

Parents ($p < .03$), and a composite measure of experienced stress based on the sum of the seven factors ($p < .05$).

Let us now consider the measures of well-being. Adolescents with employed mothers reported significantly lower self-esteem ($p < .05$), lower life satisfaction ($p < .07$), and more general anxiety ($p < .10$). In general, the direction of these differences indicated that adolescents whose mothers were employed outside the home reported a poorer quality of life. These same adolescents reported a significantly greater internal locus of control ($p < .01$), both in terms of control ideology on beliefs ($p < .02$) and feelings of personal control ($p < .02$).

Demographic and Situational Characteristics and Social Support

A number of four-way ANOVA's were computed, separately for mothers, fathers, and peers, in which various combinations of demographic and/or situational variable were related to characteristics of the informal helping relationship provided by a particular helper. In all cases, two levels of each independent variable (e.g., mother's age: 40 or younger/41 or older) were used. The dependent variables, five in all, included: (1) likelihood of informing helper when experiencing difficulties making the adolescents tense; 2) satisfaction with help received; 3) total number of reasons endorsed for informing helper when tense; 4) total number of reasons endorsed for not informing helper when tense; and 5) total number of problems (from a list of twelve) respondents felt free to discuss with their helpers.

We will present the few statistically significant main

effects that were present. First, mothers' employment status ($F = 7.499$, $df = 1$, $p < .007$) and number of siblings ($F = 10.837$, $df = 1$, $p < .002$) were significantly related to likelihood of informing mother when experiencing difficulties. Adolescents with working mothers and adolescents with more siblings were less likely to inform mothers when they were experiencing difficulties. There was one significant main effect related to the number of problems adolescents felt free to discuss with their mothers. Adolescents with larger family incomes (higher socio economic class) felt free to discuss more problems with their mothers ($F = 6.106$, $df = 1$, $p < .014$).

Number of siblings was also found to have a significant main effect on likelihood of informing fathers when tense ($F = 7.852$, $df = 1$, $p < .006$). Adolescents from larger families were less likely to inform their fathers when they were experiencing difficulties that were making them feel tense.

Finally two situational variables had significant main effects on likelihood of informing a peer when adolescents were experiencing difficulties which were making them tense: maternal employment status ($F = 4.514$, $df = 1$, $p < .033$), and a number of siblings ($F = 7.901$, $df = 1$, $p < .046$). Thus adolescents with employed mothers, and adolescents with more siblings, were both less likely to inform a peer when they were experiencing difficulties.

Sex Differences

The effects of maternal employment were examined separately for males and females. No differences were found for

males; that is, maternal employment had no effect on the variables of social support, experienced stress, or emotional and physical health. The data from the females, however did reveal significant differences as a function of maternal employment status on these same variables. Thus, whatever negative effects maternal employment was found to have on such factors as social support, experienced life stress and well-being were present only for the female adolescents in the sample.

Discussion

Although, in previous studies, full and part-time maternal employment were found to differ in some of their effects on adolescents, this was not the case with the particular variables studied here. There were no significant differences between the effect of full-time and part-time maternal employment on adolescent's disclosure of problems and tensions to mothers, their satisfaction with mother's help, their description of mother's typical reactions, their reports of experienced stress or their reported levels of well-being. However, when compared with non-working mothers, maternal employment (full and part-time combined) did have some obvious negative effects on female, but not male adolescents. Females whose mothers were employed saw their mothers as less interested in their problems and anxieties, less easy to talk to, less approachable and less responsive. Perhaps because of these perceptions they did not as readily go to their mothers for help when they had difficulties or were in distress.

In spite of the apparent poorer responsiveness of the

working mothers, the young women did not rely more heavily on either their fathers or their friends. The impression one is left with is that female adolescents with working mothers receive less support in general from their available social networks than do the females with mothers who are homemakers.

Previous research studies (Burke and Weir, 1977b; Pinneau, 1976) have suggested that social support has the potential to serve (1) a preventative function, reducing the impact of stress, and (2) a therapeutic function by interrupting the accumulation of stress and its possible adverse effects. Thus, one would expect that the female adolescents with working mothers would experience more stress and report less satisfaction and a lower quality of well being. That expectation is borne out by the findings in this study.

Interestingly, the sources of stress which female adolescents with working mothers found to be most intense suggest that the absence of the mother may leave a substantial void in their lives. For example, they reported that not being understood by others, and not getting enough attention from their parents were greater problems for them than for female adolescents with non-working mothers. These expressions of deprivation may help to explain Proppers' (1972) finding that 45% of her sample of adolescents disapproved of their mothers working.

The female adolescents with employed mothers also reported being under greater stress because of difficulties in their parent's relationship. An earlier study (Burke and Weir,

1976), in fact, found that husbands of working wives were significantly less satisfied with their marriages and with life in general than were husbands of homemakers. Propper (1972) also found that 30% of the adolescents in her sample said their fathers disapproved of their mothers working. Thus, it seems that maternal employment may be associated with difficulties in the relationship of the parents and this in turn creates a stressful environment for the adolescents.

Contrary to what previous reviewers have indicated (Hoffman & Nye, 1974; Howell, 1972) maternal employment in this study did have a negative effect on the well-being of at least the female adolescents, decreasing their life satisfaction and increasing their negative affective states and psychosomatic complaints. Hartley (1960) points out that adolescence is a time when females are under particularly strong social pressures to accommodate to traditional sex roles. Mothers, of course, would be crucial sex-role models for their female children. Yet when mothers are employed they do not neatly fit the socially proscribed feminine role still so dominant in the society. The alternate role model they personify may create a degree of ambivalence and uncertainty in their adolescent daughters about the direction their own sexual and social identities should take and result in them experiencing greater stress.

Moreover, according to Bardwick and Douvan (1971), adolescent girls also tend to remain psychologically more dependent than boys for a longer period because of the way they are

socialized. They need more attention and affirmation from significant others for their self esteem and their self definition. It would be quite realistic to assume that working mothers, in carrying job responsibilities in addition to household responsibilities, might have reduced energy and time to provide the cognitive and emotional dimensions necessary to meet the needs of their still dependent daughters. If this is not forthcoming from the mothers and no significant other is perceived as a potential provider of the required nurturance and confirmation, then feelings of insecurity and inadequacy may ensue.

To counteract this observed sex specific effect of maternal employment one might be tempted to fall back into a traditional stance and suggest that mothers stay home with their adolescent daughters. What makes more sense in an age of liberation is to increase the awareness, credibility and accessibility of other people in the social network, such as fathers and peers, for the potential nurturant and supportive functions they might perform. The expansion of sources of support to young adolescent girls along with gradually changing social attitudes toward stereotype sex roles might be expected to decrease the vulnerability of and pressures on young women at this particular stage of development.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Adolescent Sample

1) Age	%
13	5
14	23
15	14
16	9
17	16
18	24
19	17
20 or over	5

2) Sex	%
Male	34
Female	66

3) Grade	%
9	34
10	8
11	14
12	9
13	35

4) Fathers' Employment Status	%
Full-time	97
Part-time	1
Unemployed	2

5) Mothers' Employment Status	%
Full-time	31
Part-time	21
Unemployed	47

6) Age of Mother	%
35 or under	5
36 - 40	24
41 - 45	32
46 - 50	24
51 - 55	12
56 - 60	1
Over 60	--

7) Age of Father	%
35 or under	1
36 - 40	12
41 - 45	29
46 - 50	29
51 - 55	22
56 - 60	4
Over 60	3

8) Yearly Family Income	%
Under $5,000	2
$5,000 - $7,500	4
$7,500 - $10,000	13
$10,000 - $12,500	9
$12,500 - $15,000	14
$15,000 - $18,000	16
$18,000 - $21,000	12
$21,000 - $25,000	14
Over $25,000	17

9) Number of Brothers	%
0	29
1	42
2	21
3	6
4	2
5 or more	1

10) Number of Sisters	%
0	33
1	39
2	21
3	4
4	2
5 or more	1

11) Ordinal Position	%
First	34
Second	35
Third	20
Fourth	16
Fifth	4
Sixth	1
Other	2

12) Father's Education	%
No high school	19
Some high school	23
Completed high school	22
Some college	7
Completed college	15
Some grad. school	3
Completed masters degree	6
Beyond masters degree	6

13) Mother's Education	%
No high school	22
Some high school	23
Completed high school	30
Some college	6
Completed college	7
Some grad. school	4
Completed masters degree	7
Beyond masters degree	1

Table 2

Reliability of Measures Used (Coefficient Alpha)

Measure of Stress	Number of Items	Reliability
Peer Acceptance	6	.81
Physical Health	2	.76
Parental Demands	2	.68
Isolation and Loneliness	5	.81
Future Goals	2	.34
Difficulties with Parents	5	.75
Relationships with Opposite Sex	2	.68
Measures of Well-being		
Satisfaction with Life	7	.74
Mental and Physical Well-being	17	.84
Emotional Dependence	6	.57
Impulse to Aggression	4	.68
Overt Agression	3	.64
Depression	6	.76
Anomie	8	.83
General Anxiety	7	.78
Resentment	7	.79
Anxiety and Tension	5	.80
Irritability	8	.77
Guilt	5	.78
Lack of Social Support	4	.72